

# County's First Commercial Solar Projects Gain OK

Miles Shuper, Valley Voice (Visalia), 9-30-10

Six solar power projects in Tulare County with a combined generating capacity of 150 megawatts have won tentative approval.

The six projects will cover 1,000 acres in southern Tulare County between Allensworth and Alpaugh.

All but about 20 acres of 1,216 acres destined to generate solar energy via solar panels are currently fallow, according to permit applications approved by the Tulare County Planning Commission.

Although about 530 acres of project land are under Williamson Act contract, cancellation proceedings have started on nearly all but about 40 acres, county officials said.

Solar Project Solutions, LLC, a Southern California-based alternative energy company, is leasing the land from the Alpaugh Irrigation District and the Atwell Irrigation District and a private property owner. The power will be sold to Pacific Gas and Electric which owns an 115,000 volt line with a 130-megawatt capacity.

The solar farms will be built near PG&E substations.

The commission's approval for the six projects is conditional pending approval by Tulare County Supervisors of developer agreements and reclamation plans, part of the criteria set a month ago by supervisors. Those agreements are expected to come before the board in two to three weeks, said John Heiser, a county planner who has been overseeing the solar power generation issue for some time. He said construction could begin by December or January.

Permits for several other projects are pending and expected to be considered soon, said Heiser. About 15 permit requests have been filed in the county, he said.

The Alpaugh North site is a 20-megawatt facility and the other Alpaugh site is a 50-megawatt facility. Both are on 550.5 acres that sit between Avenue 68 and Avenue 56 west of State Highway 43.

The other 30-megawatt facility, known as the White River Solar Generation Facility, is on 180 acres between Avenue 50 and Avenue 52, west of Road 56. About 40 acres are under Williamson Act contract.

The third site, referred to as the Atwell Island Solar Generation Facility Project, will contain three 20-megawatt facilities on 480 acres about one mile north of the Tulare-Kern County line east of Road 48.

Heiser said nearly all the land for the projects currently is fallow due to lack of water and only about 20 acres of a 40-acre Williamson Act contract parcel is used for growing cotton.

A contract cancellation for part of that site is being considered, he said.

Williamson Act contracts provide land owners with reduced property taxes in exchange for restrictions of non-farming use.

The standards set by supervisors basically provide a two-level criteria plan for farmland to be considered for solar farms, one level for contract land and one for non-contract property.

The California and Tulare County Farm Bureaus have opposed solar farms on Williamson Act land and were involved with the Tulare County Agricultural Advisory Committee, county officials and other to help establish criteria.